

CAMEO KIRBY

By Booth
Tarkington and
Harry Leon
Wilson

Adapted From
the Play of the Same
Name by W. B. M.
Ferguson

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CHAPTER III.

COLONEL JACQUES GASPARD DESCHAMPS MOREAU, to give him his full title, doing all things thoroughly, as befitted one of his honorable character, was not satisfied with, as he thought, disposing of Kirby's physical existence, but considered it his pleasant duty to effectually ruin whatever little reputation had survived during the other's downward career.

Kirby, presumably fatally wounded, had been carried ashore by Bunce at the next landing, and, in those days shooting and snatching affairs emanating from card games being only too common, but little attention had been paid to the affair. Cameo Kirby was notorious the length of the river, and such an abrupt and tragic termination of his career had not only been frequently and cheerfully predicted, but was, moreover, expected of all such members as graced his questionable profession. Indeed, for them a sober and respectable death would have been considered bad form. Among the gambling profession there existed a certain code, which in a manner served to link those at the top, who like Kirby and Bunce, were fortune hunters, to the lowest rung in the gamblers' social ladder.

This code, if so it may be termed, was an understanding to the effect that in no instance, however great the provocation, should the law be invoked. Wrongs, fancied or authentic, were to be redressed solely by the beaters thereof, the joint office of judge and executioner being vested in each separate and distinct individual.

In view of this accepted understanding, Larkin Bunce had accordingly made no mention of the fact that a probable murder had been committed, and the passengers and steamship officials dismissing it as a gamblers' quarrel, which was none of their affair, no stigma or notoriety was attached to the good Colonel Moreau, who, claiming to be an old and valued friend of Mr. Randall, had come to the latter's state-room and brazenly assumed charge of the body. Bunce's laconic statement was too pitifully true, for the old planter had effectually ended his life.

Again referring to Colonel Moreau's happy faculty of doing all things well, it was quite characteristic that to complete his revenge against Cameo Kirby he now did not hesitate to assume charge of Mr. Randall's body, did not hesitate to meet the son of the man for whose death he had been directly and shamefully responsible, for young Tom Randall had ridden over to the Plaquemine landing in order to greet his father, while over at the old homestead all was bustle and excitement in honor of the master's homecoming.

Anxiously Tom Randall waited to see the jovial and well known figure of his father march down the gangplank, waited to catch a glimpse of the familiar and weather-beaten green portmanteau which the planter always carried. The moments passed. Other and numerous passengers stepped ashore, to be eagerly welcomed and claimed by their own, but John Randall was not among them. A curious and seemingly pregnant hush had succeeded the landing of the freight, and off somewhere in the darkness a child whimpered shrilly. The boy's nerves were set on edge. Perhaps his father was having a farewell talk with the captain and would come dashing out at the last moment with all his old regard for time and place. It was time the bell was clanging, the signal for backing away, for now the landing of passengers and freight appeared to be terminated. And still no John Randall. The boy walked along the string piece until the Texas deck came the more prominently into view, the glow from the open windows of the port staterooms silhouetting the lean visaged pilot, absolute monarch of his realm, who now that an easy stretch of the river had been entered loomed about while his cub took the wheel.

"Hello, on board the Shotwell!" shouted young Randall, looking up at the pilot-house. "Is that you, Mr. Bixby? This is Tom Randall. Do you know if my father is on board? We were expecting him by your boat, sir."

For reply Mr. Bixby, usually the pattern of courtesy, offered a meek syllabic affirmative and turned from the window.

But young Randall had no time to nurse his quick resentment, for now, at last, his father had come ashore, borne on the shoulders of two stout abouts, while the captain and officers stood with bared heads and thankfully left the unwelcome task of explaining the tragedy to the amiable and willing Colonel Moreau.

"My boy," said the latter, now laying a fatherly hand on young Randall's heaving shoulder, "although I am a stranger to you, sir, I have ventured to assume temporary control of this terrible affair, for I am a southern gentleman, as was Mr. Randall, and I feel bound to you all by the ties of sympathy and country. I was a witness, sir, to the events which preceded and prompted this outrage, and although I am aware it is but poor satisfaction, still it is something to know that the scoundrel who was instrumental in causing your father's death has already paid for it with his life. My name, sir, is Colonel Moreau, and if I can be of any further service to you all in this dark hour of tribulation pray com-

mand me, sir. As an old soldier I beg of you to meet this calamity with the fortitude of a Christian gentleman, with which admirable and pious adjuration the good colonel flourished his handkerchief and helped himself to a generous pinch of snuff.

"I thank you, Colonel Moreau, for all you have done," said young Randall stonily, looking on the huddled thing at his feet. "You—you say you witnessed my father's death?"

"Not exactly, sir, for he shot himself in his state-room. However hard to bear, I think you should know what and what prompted his death. The scoundrel, sir, was the notorious Cameo Kirby, of whom, perhaps, you have heard."

Young Randall nodded dully, and Moreau, entering into the spirit of the tale, continued: "I formed an acquaintance, sir, with your father when he came aboard at New Orleans. He confided to every one that he had sold his sugar crop for ten thousand and had the cash with him, and he was in mighty high spirits because he was on his way back home to see his children. Poh gentlemen! As delicately as I can I must state that he was not quite himself, and by that, sir, I mean that he had been imbibing a little too freely. I don't have to tell you, sir, that there are certain characters on all the big boats who keep a pretty sharp lookout for gentlemen with money who are in the condition you, father, sir, was in tonight, and I expect there was more than one river gambler on board who would have liked to get his hands on Mr. Randall. But the one who got him was the slickest and cleverest of the lot, the Cameo Kirby, whom I have mentioned. This rascal, sir, inveigled your father into a private stateroom, plied him with molasses and won from him not only all his money and personal effects—even including a miniature of your dear mother, sir—but also a deed to his entire plantation and all his slaves, everything which he owned. I was too late to save Mr. Randall, but I knew Kirby by repute, and I was so scorchingly outraged by the whole affair that I denounced him for the whole scoundrel was. Thereupon he drew on me, for I was the quicker and shot him down like a dog. They carried him ashore, sir, at the landing below this, and the river is cleaner for his death."

"You have taken vengeance out of my hands," said young Randall unsteadily. "The coward and villain. For a stranger, sir, the attitude which you have displayed toward my family has been most considerate, and I will never forget it. The hospitality of a house in mourning."

"No, no, my boy," interrupted Moreau, again employing his fatherly hand. "I am sensible of the honor, but I couldn't think of it. This is a time when you all must wish to be alone, and business calls me north. I merely stepped ashore in your interests as any gentleman would have done. There goes the bell, and I must run for it. Honored, sir, to have made your acquaintance, though of course I deeply deplore the necessity which occasioned it. I will venture to pay my respects to your family when I return south, and pray command me in any occasion you may have. Your servant, sir."

And with a magnificent bow the colonel turned and raced for the gangplank, boarding the Shotwell with a leap that shamed his fifty odd years.

Meanwhile Cameo Kirby, a bullet through his right lung, was making a desperate battle against death, fighting for the life which he had considered little better than worthless.

In his efforts he was materially assisted by the crude but faithful Bunce, his gambling partner, with whom he had played up and down the Mississippi for years. For two weeks this combat raged, Kirby hovering between life and death, but at the end he emerged triumphant, as, over the gaming table when the odds were as heavily against him, he had emerged from many a hotly contested conflict.

To those who judged Kirby's character from the evil reports which gossip had spread concerning him and to others who, in their righteous ignorance, considered all gamblers legitimate children of the devil his remarkable recovery would have been accepted merely as another proof that the evil eye

favors his own, that the mills of the gods grind slowly, that justice is blind, and that a scoundrel is difficult to kill, together with many similar ancient and redoubtable maxims which ignorance and self-righteousness love to distribute on every fitting occasion.

Among possessors of the last mentioned attribute Eugene Kirby was regarded as a black sheep who, religiously avoiding the whitewash brush, was deemed beyond redemption, for what man worthy of the name would have acted as had the last of the Kirbys? What if he had been but fifteen when his father died a bankrupt? What if he had been left an orphan, a pauper, with no immediate relative to care how he acted? Wasn't the heritage of an ancient and honorable name, the knowledge that some of the oldest and best blood in all the south flowed in his veins, enough to keep him straight? Most assuredly it was. There was absolutely no excuse for his drifting in with wild and dissolute companions, becoming a common river gambler and rendering notorious and obnoxious a name which had hitherto been the synonym for honor and integrity.

Kirby had been kept in ignorance of Mr. Randall's suicide, but when at length he became conversant Larkin Bunce, harking back to the events of that memorable night, informed him, and the invalid, on his part, recounted the occurrences preceding Colonel Moreau's precipitation of the "honorable" combat.

"The news of Mr. Randall's death is a great shock," he added, greatly moved. "He was my father's friend, Bunce, and when the devil played havoc with our affairs did all in his power to be of assistance. But for

ful climate of Mexico. He knew that Kirby was not the type of man to forget or condone a bullet in the back or the smirching of whatever little remained of his once fair reputation, and had he even remotely suspected that he would recover he (Moreau) would not have prevaricated so cheerfully and with such abandon to young Randall. How much did the boy now know? That was the all important question. Kirby, of course, had learned that he stood accused of the late John Randall's suicide, but had he taken the trouble to refute it? Moreau did not think so, and Moreau was right.

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Meanwhile the passing year had brought with it many changes for the surviving members of the Randall family. Life is tenacious, and they had persisted in surviving as best they could the shock incident upon their father's suicide. The one small measure of satisfaction in the whole terrible affair was the knowledge that the despoiler of their home had promptly met his death and that in consequence they were at least saved from pauperization, for they were entirely ignorant of Kirby's recovery or the measures he had voluntarily taken for their protection.

To the only girl, Adele, had fallen the brunt of suffering. The General, a child of eight, was too young to fully comprehend his loss, while Tom, a hot headed youth in his early twenties, occupied all his time with the plantation and devoted all spare moments to nursing his hatred against Kirby's memory. While glorying in the latter's supposed death he deplored that his hand had not effected it. Where grief had paralyzed Adele it had but further aroused the boy's militant and aggressive nature, adding, moreover, a veneer of youthful and bitter cynicism.

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"Supposing that scoundrel has lived and intends reaping the reward of his crime?" he would cry. "He gained that deed by the vilest scoundrelism ever practiced. Well, let him make good his claim if he can."

"But who will dispute it?" Adele would lifelessly inquire, plucking at her black dress, while twin patches of scarlet would begin to burn in the dead white of her face. "Do you think we could stoop to ask mercy from a man of that stamp? Whether the deed was gained honestly or not, it does not matter. Father's signature is on the paper, and we must stand by it, Tom. You know that. Anyway," she would finish dearly, "what does it matter? What does it matter where we go, what we become? Let this Mr. Kirby—if that be his name—finish the work he began so well."

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"You know you wouldn't," said Kirby simply. "The moment I learn that Moreau has returned you may arrange a meeting for us. You can leave the rest to me."

Bunce nodded. "I guess there ain't any one who could get the better of you, Gene, face to face. I ain't much of a hand at the gospel, but I'll scare up a prayer or two for Jack Moreau's soul."

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solutely necessary. Above all, there must on no account be any opposition to this Mr. Kirby's claim, supposing he still lives."

"Yes, I suppose you're right, Adele," he would reluctantly agree. "We could not dishonor father's memory by resisting the scoundrel's claim."

And had sorrow not blurred the girl's perception, rendered her indifferent to everything, she would instantly have suspected her brother's ingenuously, for, hot headed and impulsive, he was not one to heed advice, accept the passive course that she had outlined.

As the months passed and nothing was heard of Kirby the possibility of his being alive and ever claiming the plantation was finally abandoned by Adele. But young Randall, although carefully professing to the contrary, still entertained the suspicion that his enemy lived. In time the thought became so insistent that he determined to quietly set on foot a thorough investigation. Visiting in person the town in which Kirby had fought his victorious battle against death, he eventually succeeded in tracing the physician who had attended the wounded gambler, and by him the boy's suspicions were verified beyond the possibility of a doubt. His intuition was vindicated. Kirby lived and, so far as the doctor knew, was at that moment busily engaged with his chosen profession.

Young Randall returned home, carefully concealing from his sister all hint of his mission. The girl had but lately expressed a desire to visit their aunt in New Orleans, for the plantation was pregnant with memories and sorrows that were fast growing unbearable. Taking advantage of this opportune desire and keeping his real purpose in the background, Tom now suggested that the house be temporarily closed and the long contemplated visit paid.

Securing Adele's assent to this and satisfied that Kirby was alive and that justice had yet to be meted out, young Randall, as was the custom in such matters, promptly set about informing his male relatives and friends. Among the latter was Judge Pleydell, a neighbor, whose plantation adjoined on the west that of the Randalls and to whose daughter, Ann, the boy was engaged.

Tom's sole surviving relative was an elderly cousin, Aaron Randall, who, ignorant of the details connected with his uncle's death, had for over a year been detained by business interests in the north. To him Tom now urgently wrote, requesting that he come to the home of their mutual aunt in New Orleans, and the following morning the Pleydell and Randall families set out for the same destination. In the Crescent City there resided another gentleman, M. Anatole Veaudry, who, having for years sought an alliance with the Randall family through the medium of Adele, would naturally be expected to concur heartily in the plans for the annihilation of Cameo Kirby. Four to one were heavy odds, but the scapegrace gambler in his day had accepted greater.

In due time the Randalls and Pleydells arrived at the home of Mme. Davezac, but the weeks passed and as yet no information had been received tending to show that Kirby contemplated securing the property. In fact, Tom Randall, scouring the city for the gambler, positively learned that the latter and his partner, Bunce, had left. This was indeed the case, for Kirby's sole motive in coming to New Orleans had been the desire to run down a rumor to the effect that Jack Moreau had returned to his old haunts. The rumor proved authentic, but the colonel had already left for Baton Rouge, from which town he again headed for the Crescent City, Kirby and Bunce close upon his heels.

And then the inevitable happened, for one day in the streets of New Orleans Tom Randall came face to face with Moreau. On both sides the meeting was an affecting one, the astute colonel's momentary alarm turning to relief when, from the boy's effusive greeting, he ascertained the other's agreeable state of ignorance regarding the true facts of John Randall's suicide. Tom at once confided his intention of killing Cameo Kirby, and, delighted at securing such unexpected reinforcements, Moreau heartily concurred in the intention, offering his modest co-operation in the same worthy cause. On his part the boy was only too happy to accept the further services of so valuable a friend, and he promptly invited Moreau to Mme. Davezac's, an invitation that was as promptly accepted, it being quite characteristic of the estimable gentleman to accept the hospitality of those whom he had irretrievably wronged.

Learning from Moreau that Kirby was in the city and, in fact, had been seen only that morning at the Salle de Conde, young Randall hurriedly returned to his aunt's, determined to set on foot a plan that had been suggested by Judge Pleydell. That motley villain, Colonel Moreau, promised to join the other the moment he had secured his portmanteau.

Meanwhile Aaron Randall, an elderly, precise gentleman, whose long sojourn in the north had served to somewhat cool his fiery southern nature, had promptly answered his cousin's urgent letter by shelling all business demands and hastening south. An old bachelor, his late uncle and he had been unusually close to each other through life, and he had lavished all his affection upon the other's children. Adele in particular being his especial favorite. Business cares had prohibited his attendance at John Randall's funeral, and, in fact, he had been kept in ignorance of the facts surrounding the other's suicide, Adele holding that it would cause needless worry and sorrow.

The unpleasant duty of explaining the tragedy devolved upon Judge Pleydell, and, even while Tom was renewing his acquaintance with Colonel Moreau, Aaron had arrived at the little house in the old French quarter of the town and Pleydell was recounting to him their plan of campaign against Kirby.

"We have all our plans arranged, sir," the old judge was now saying, while he paced the room in some excitement, "and I have taken affairs more or less into my own hands. Tom would have hunted out the villain and

shot him on sight, but I venture to think my way is the best, for we must recognize the honor due Mr. Randall's memory, and that means making no resistance to Mr. Kirby's claim. The first thing to do is to send your cousins out to the plantation, and they will surrender the place to the claimant—slaves, land, everything. Then, sir, we send the ladies—Mme. Davezac, along with my daughter Ann and the little boy—over to my plantation, while we remain behind to deal with the gentleman. You understand? I don't think he'll live very long to enjoy the property, and this time I don't think he'll get well."

"We'll see to that," replied Aaron quietly. "There's you and Tom and I—"

"And Colonel Moreau," supplemented the judge. "I understand he is a dead shot. Then there is M. Veaudry, whom you know. He has long been a suitor of Miss Adele's, but since her father's death naturally she has been in no frame of mind for courtship, and consequently poor Anatole is as bitter on the subject of Kirby as she herself."

"Poor Cousin Adele!" murmured Aaron, wiping his eyes. "When I last saw her she was such a happy, bright eyed girl. To think of her young life being made a tragedy by this scoundrel! I'd cut off my right hand for that girl, Judge Pleydell. But this Colonel Moreau, this defender of the family—you speak of his co-operation. Is he, then, in town?"

"I have heard so," said the other quietly, "and there is no doubt that he will join us in our crusade against this scoundrel. He is not the man to forget or condone